

**WRITTEN STATEMENT OF
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Before the
HOUSE AGRICULTURE SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, CREDIT,
RURAL DEVELOPMENT, AND RESEARCH**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide written testimony on the agricultural conservation programs administered by the USDA.

As Congress prepares to reauthorize the Farm Bill, this Subcommittee has the enormous responsibility of developing a conservation policy that will affect America's rural landscape for the next two to three decades.

Therefore I appreciate this opportunity to present to you the perspective of my constituents in the Northeast. In mid-February of this year, I helped organize a northeastern agricultural conservation conference in Albany, New York. This conference was well-attended and included farmers, private conservation and environmental organizations, and members of the various state agriculture, conservation, and wildlife departments from all of the northeastern states. My goal was to get grassroots comments on the current conservation programs that could assist Congress with the reauthorization of the Conservation Title. While this meeting was regional in scope, its conclusions are certainly pertinent to the national scene, and I intend to highlight its findings in this testimony.

There is little doubt in my mind that farmers and ranchers want to be good stewards of the land. They understand the land better than most of us and realize the positive relationship between good stewardship and improved productivity. Congress has encouraged good stewardship by creating voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs. We must now reauthorize the Conservation Title and seize the opportunity to expand and improve these programs.

These conservation programs not only benefit farmers and ranchers - they play a critical role in improving the quality of life for all Americans. These programs benefit us all by providing opportunities to improve our water supplies, improve air quality, combat urban sprawl, protect our wildlife, and preserve open spaces.

While these programs have worked well, there is room for improvement. I recently visited some farms in my Central New York district that are beneficiaries of programs such as EQIP and WRP. These programs have done wonders for the environment and have provided much needed income for these family farms. However, I have also spoken to farmers who have been unable to benefit from conservation programs. This is not by choice, but rather because of limitations within these programs and the tremendous backlog in processing applications. The USDA described these concerns in testimony before this Subcommittee on May 23, 2001 and I have summarized the extent of the backlog in the following table. It provides strong evidence that America's farmers and ranchers want to take advantage of these programs and Congress should provide the legislative authority for them to do so. As this Subcommittee and the House Agriculture Committee move forward with the Farm Bill debate, I urge all of its members to not only reauthorize these programs, but to also significantly increase their funding so as to address this backlog and allow these conservation programs to expand.

Name of Program	Backlog of acres waiting to be enrolled	Dollars required to fund the backlog
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	67 million	1.4 billion
Farmland Protection Program (FPP)	158 thousand	165 million
Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)	560 thousand	570 million
Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)	565 thousand	20 million
Forest Incentive Program (FIP)	Not available	10 million

Data provided by USDA-NRCS in testimony before the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development, and Research; May 23, 2001.

These figures are large, yet they do not complete the picture. I have only highlighted certain programs managed by the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and have not mentioned those programs administered by the USDA-Farm Service Agency (USDA-FSA). The largest and most popular of the FSA conservation programs is the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). As you are aware, the CRP acreage enrollment cap of 36.4 million acres will be reached by 2003. As with the other conservation programs, the demand for CRP enrollment is high and Congress should respond by increasing the enrollment cap.

As I mentioned earlier, I want to take the opportunity to highlight some conservation programs that I believe should play an important role in the future of agricultural conservation.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP):

This program provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers seeking to implement structural, vegetative, and land management practices that lead to improved water quality. EQIP currently targets geographical areas that have significant water, soil or related natural resource concerns that have been identified through a locally led conservation process. EQIP is working well and has resulted in cleaner streams and rivers in many regions of this country. However, while I am a big proponent of EQIP, I also realize that it has some problems that need to be addressed, and the reauthorization of the Conservation Title offers an opportunity to do this. When EQIP was implemented, limited funding necessitated targeting priority areas and thus the program has been unable to serve all farmers. Now that we know EQIP works and that there is a huge demand for enrollment, Congress should increase funding and allow more farmer participation. In addition, increased funding will in turn provide opportunities for expanded flexibility, which for example, could help farmers and ranchers address upcoming manure management regulations.

Farmland Protection Program (FPP):

This program partners with state and local funds to purchase the development rights to keep productive farmland in agricultural, and goes a long way in helping curb urban sprawl. The

concept of the FPP was nicely summarized in a May 30, 2001 New York Times article: *“From 1992 to 1997, more than six million acres of farmland was developed for residential, commercial and industrial uses, including 132,000 acres in New York State. The idea of buying development rights on farmland is simple. The land is appraised for what it would be worth on the open market, and then for what it would be worth if it could be used only for farming. The farmer is paid the difference and a conservation easement, which restricts or prohibits future development on the property, is granted”*. The FPP is an excellent way of preserving farmland for many years to come and helps provide a means for maintaining a viable rural economy. Local interest in this program remains strong with approximately 158 thousand acres waiting to be enrolled. However, as Mr. Thomas Weber, from the USDA-NRCS, testified on May 23, 2001, the \$35 million authorized in 1996 has been spent and money from the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000 is being used to fund the program this year. Congress needs to rectify this funding problem and revitalize this important program.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP):

This program preserves, enhances, and restores wetlands on marginal soils where wetland functions have been depleted. USDA-NRCS provides both technical and financial support to help landowners with their restoration and/or preservation efforts. By its nature, WRP provides long term benefits to both the environment and taxpayers by restoring these marginal landscapes and reducing the damage caused by flooding. In addition, this program has benefited wildlife – as any bird watcher or duck hunter will tell you, there has been a marked increase in our nation’s migratory bird numbers in recent years, and WRP can take some credit for this. In fact WRP has been so successful that the cumulative enrollment cap of 1,075,000 acres set in the 1996 Farm Bill will be reached this year. As with previously mentioned programs, WRP is very popular with a backlog of approximately 560 thousand acres waiting to be enrolled. In order to continue WRP’s successes, Congress needs to increase the enrollment cap and provide funding to address this backlog.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP):

This program provides private landowners the opportunity to restore or establish wildlife and fish habitats on their land. In return for implementing a habitat plan, NRCS will provide both financial and technical assistance. WHIP has been an overwhelming success: within the first two years of its implementation, 1.4 million acres were enrolled. One reason for this success is its ability to attract matching funds, with an estimated \$36.4 million coming from interested landowners and state wildlife agencies. WHIP is another example of working partnerships and should be further encouraged by Congress. The program was initially funded at \$50 million, but because of its popularity these funds were fully expended by the end of FY 1999. As with the FPP, an additional \$12.5 million was provided for this year through the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000. Again, there is a backlog of 565 thousand acres waiting to be enrolled. Again, this is due to limited funding and Congress should reauthorize and fund WHIP so as to address this backlog and get these acres enrolled into this valuable program.

Forestry Incentives Program (FIP):

This program targets non-industrial private forestlands and provides cost-share assistance for landowners that agree to practice good forest management. It is designed to benefit the environment while meeting future demands for wood products. While this program is not applicable to all states, the USDA-NRCS estimates that nearly 4 million acres of tree planting and 1.5 million acres of tree stand improvement have been established because of FIP. This program serves as a resource to keep our private forests viable and productive.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP):

This is a voluntary long-term cropland retirement program, that enables producers to convert highly erodible or environmentally sensitive cropland to cover crops such as grasses or trees for a period of 10 to 15 years. Since CRP's implementation, approximately 34 million acres have been enrolled.

Two new components that are beneficial to the Northeast have been incorporated into CRP – both programs address water quality issues in a smaller but more targeted manner. Rather than requiring landowners to “bid in” their land during specific sign up periods, the Continuous Enrollment Program (Continuous CRP) allows farmers to enroll their land at any time. Continuous CRP establishes filter strips, riparian buffers, and grassed waterways which all contribute to improved water quality. The idea of an incentive-based continuous signup has greatly increased the level of interest in the enrollment of land, with over a 10-fold increase in filter strip enrollment compared to the general signup. As a result, over 1.5 million acres have been enrolled in this program.

The other very successful component of CRP is the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). CREP is another good example of a federal-state partnership, and addresses significant water quality, soil erosion, and wildlife habitat issues related to agricultural use. Financial incentives are used to encourage landowners to enroll sensitive land in 10 to 15 year contracts. This program targets specific geographical regions and currently 15 States are participating, with another 9 States waiting for approval. Examples of CREP programs include the New York City watershed, the Chesapeake Bay, the Minnesota River, and the North Central Valley of California.

CRP has proven very popular among landowners, hunters and the environmental community since it provides a steady, long-term source of income to farmers and ranchers, increases wildlife habitat, and significantly improves water quality. Congress needs to continue its support of CRP, especially the new components, and increase the number of acres that can be enrolled.

Technical Assistance:

Underlying all of the conservation programs I have addressed is the issue of technical assistance. Apart from a small number of private consultants, the USDA provides the vast majority of technical assistance. If Congress truly intends to expand the conservation programs, we need to make sure that these programs can be implemented correctly and in an

efficient manner. During this Subcommittee's May 23, 2001 hearing on these conservation programs, all of your witnesses discussed the importance of technical assistance. I can only add to this by stating that adequate technical assistance was a major concern during the Albany conservation conference that I mentioned earlier, and since then, by numerous farmers who have contacted me.

Last, but not least, the **Conservation Security Act (CSA)**:

Some constituents in my district believe that a new program ought to be established that will support farmers who manage the land well and provide environmental benefits to the public. One such program that has been proposed is CSA. This is a bipartisan proposal that I believe deserves your thoughtful consideration.

In closing, we do not need to be reminded that America's farmers and ranchers are the lifeblood of our country. We all appreciate the inexpensive and bountiful food that they provide for us. However, we must recognize that American farmers and ranchers are facing a crisis. One way Congress can help is to expand the USDA conservation programs that provide the financial and technical help that allow them to implement practices that benefit everyone. These voluntary, incentive-based programs provide long term solutions to managing the land and provide the opportunities for good land stewardship.

Mr. Chairman, thanks again for allowing me the opportunity to provide written testimony on this important issue. If I can address any questions or concerns, please not hesitate to contact me.